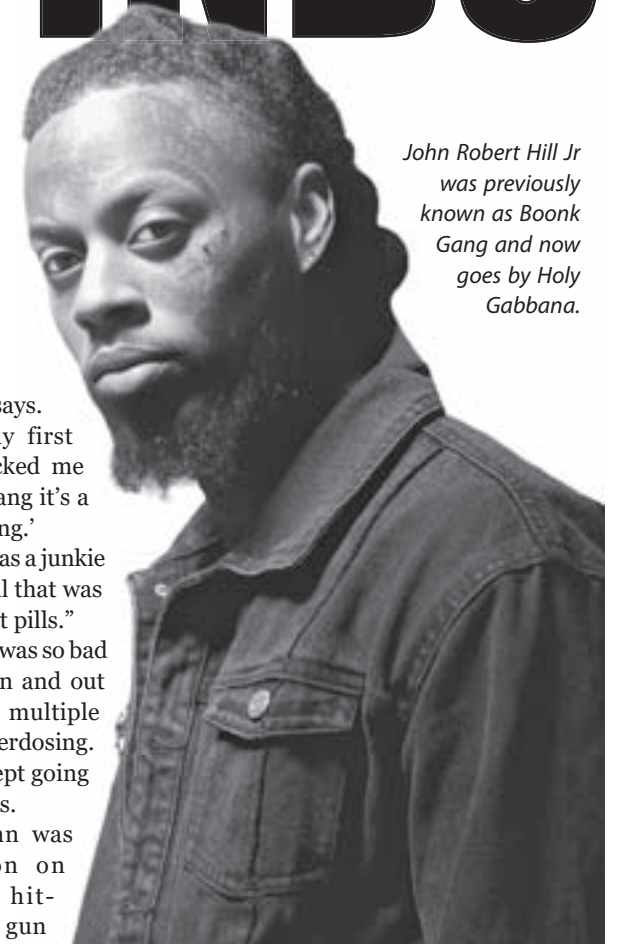


GANGSTER FINDS A NEW LIFE



John Robert Hill Jr was previously known as Boonk Gang and now goes by Holy Gabbana.

At the age of 20, John Robert Hill Jr, previously known as Boonk Gang, had more than 5 million followers on Instagram. But in 2018, he found himself in prison, where his life took a dramatic turn.

John grew up as the oldest of seven children. His biological father was in and out of prison, so he was raised by his mother and stepfather. But when he was 14, his stepfather passed away from cancer.

“At the age of 14, I believe that’s a pivotal time for a young man to be in need of a father. I was learning about what it means to be a man and still trying to find my identity,” he says in a God Behind Bars podcast.

His stepfather had been the only

role model he had and the loss impacted him deeply.

“My mom would beat me to the point where it was abuse. I wasn’t allowed to emote, I wasn’t allowed to express myself.

“After my stepdad died, she stopped providing for us so I started stealing from the stores.”

Before he graduated from high school, John got kicked out of his home.

“So since a young age, I’ve been navigating through life and providing for myself.

“When I got famous, I had a lot of anger, bitterness and brokenness inside of me.”

His popularity grew when he started posting videos of himself committing crimes on Instagram.

Sharing in a video with Marcus Rogers, he recalls, “I realized that being a fool gained more attention...

[it] gains attention quicker than being positive and wise.

“But I knew that I that’s not who I was, that’s not who I wanted to be.”

But fame came with a price. He turned to drugs to cope with the pressure of fame.

“I didn’t blow up with a team. I didn’t blow up with a manager. I blew up from

the streets,” he says.

“I popped my first pill and it knocked me out. I’m like, ‘Dang it’s a marvellous feeling.’

“It was like I was a junkie because that’s all that was on my mind, just pills.”

The addiction was so bad that John was in and out of the hospital multiple times due to overdosing. Even then, he kept going back to the drugs.

In 2018, John was sent to prison on charges of a hit-and-run, three gun charges and possession of narcotics.

That was where he met his cellmate, Joshua.

Joshua asked him if he believed in Jesus.

“For that man to ask me if I believed in Jesus, that lets me know that God was always thinking about me,” John attests.

“At any time I could have been sentenced and anybody else could have been my cellmate but in jail, I encountered Jesus.

“A lot of people don’t understand that God speaks through people. In that moment, God reached me through my cellmate.”

Throughout their time in prison together, Joshua ministered to John.

“He was showing me the love of God, he became a real brother.”

One night, John decided to sing worship songs.

“I’m like, ‘Jesus loves you, for He died on the cross for our sins. He’s always with you from beginning to the end.’

“I’m singing. Then I lay down bundled up in my cover and I started crying.

“I was alleviated of the sadness that I was feeling and a presence came over me. This something hovered over me and stripped my sadness away and filled me with joy and made me happy. I’ve experienced what it’s like to be high and I’ve experienced hallucinations.

“This though, I’ve never experienced this before.”

John woke Joshua up to tell him what had happened. His cellmate then told him that he had an encounter with the Holy Spirit [the unseen presence of God].

Even then, John’s life hadn’t changed.



Magic or miracles?

Magician and skeptic André Kole was challenged to investigate the validity of the miracles of Jesus Christ. Would he debunk Jesus’ miracles or become convinced they were literally “acts of God”?



André Kole

André Kole (1936-2022) was seven when he was inspired to become a magician after seeing an illusionist’s performance. By the age of 20, he was performing his Table of Death trick on national television.

He went on to invent more than 1000 illusions including the Squeeze Box and the Head Mover, which has been performed by David Copperfield. Throughout his career, André performed in 80 countries on five continents. He was named Inventor of the Decade by the International Magicians Society and was awarded by The Academy of Magical Arts in Hollywood.

He was also known for governments commissioning him to investigate “miracle workers” who were duping people out of their money with fraudulent miracle cures. He never failed to work out how these fraudsters were tricking people.

At the time he was challenged to investigate the miracles of Jesus Christ, André was a skeptic and believed Jesus was probably most successful magician who had ever lived.

He acknowledged that if he was wrong and the miracles of Jesus were real, then God was real.

He wrote in his essay, *Jesus: Magician or God?* “A miracle has been defined as an ‘act of God’. It is something that

only God can do. Anyone can claim to be God and quite a few have; however, only God can do what only God can do. Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster or any other founders of the world’s great religions never claimed to be God. None of them ever claimed to be able to perform miracle. In all of human history, Jesus was unique.

“He could instantly heal every known sickness and disease of every person who came to Him. He could raise the dead. He could take a small boy’s lunch and multiply it to feed over 5,000 people. He could say to a raging storm, ‘Peace, be still’ and the storm would instantly stop.”

The Bible reports Jesus performed these incredible miracles, however non-religious historians also documented Jesus’ miracles.

First-century historian Josephus Flavius, wrote about Jesus in his Jewish Antiquities. “...we learn that Jesus was a wise man who did surprising feats.”

• Turn to page 2

“When I got out of jail, I was still tugging it and I was still pursuing the things of the world,” he admits.

It was only later when he saw his friend get shot and survive the near-death experience that John decided to give his life to Jesus.

“Jesus is real.

“I tell people, ‘You may not be thinking about Jesus but He is thinking about you.’”

John now goes by the name Holy Gabbana, a reflection of his transformation. He understands that his past experiences have now been redeemed by God to reach out to others who can relate to him.

“Now that I am a man of faith and I am walking out the Gospel, I’m not dependent on drugs anymore. I’m familiar with God and His love so I know the void that was within me could only be filled by Jesus.”

John now preaches the Gospel in prisons, juvenile detention centres, schools, and colleges.



Ask Y: Peter Meadows answers your questions about God

QUESTION: CAN'T I JUST FIGURE GOD OUT FOR MYSELF?



SOUNDS pretty easy doesn't it? To use a bit of brain power and a smattering of commonsense to work out who or what God is, what He's up to and what He wants from us?

But if that was possible we wouldn't need Christmas. Okay, I know that sounds strange but hang in with me for a moment. First, let me give you a few reasons why figuring out God ourselves is always going to be like trying to push a cloud of smoke up a hill.

First, have you ever been to the dentist for a check-up hoping they would find nothing wrong – even if potential disaster was lurking somewhere beneath the enamel? I know I have – being more interested in my own self-interest than finding what was true.

In the same way there's a bias when we start asking ourselves God-questions. We try to limit our discoveries to things which fit our comfort zones, mesh with our timetables and accommodate our priorities. And God may not be like that at all.

And what about the limit to our knowledge? Humankind has yet to even find a cure for the common cold. So how can we possibly believe we know enough to discover what the Creator of everything is like?

More than that, there's also a limit

to our reasoning power. A toddler asks "Why?" and "How?" and "Why?" again... and again. The parent has the answers and would love to be able to give them, but doesn't because the child's intellectual ability does not stretch far enough to cope.

That's how it is when exploring the God-agenda. Our brain power does not match the task.

So are we stranded in this vast universe with no way of knowing its Maker? That's how it would be – but for the event we celebrate at Christmas. Because the often sentimental 'baby in a manger' stuff is actually the story of God opening up the conversation with us, coming down to our level to give us the answers we need. It's like what would have to happen if my goldfish were ever to come to know what I think of him. I'd have to become like him and enter his fishy little world. And at the event we call Christmas, that is what God did Himself. He came into our world as a Man, to let us have the answers to our questions about Him. That's why Jesus is worth listening to!

Peter Meadows is the co-author with Joseph Steinberg of *The Book of Y* the basis for the eight week Y Course that explores life's biggest questions.

From drug addiction to hope

BY JASMINE, EX-PRISONER

Rosie* freezes as she hears my parents' drunken footsteps on the path. I can see the panic in our babysitter's eyes. Silently, she wraps her arms around me and my little brother – she's holding us so tightly like she will never let go. I feel safe in her arms, but I know any second that feeling will vanish.

The front door slams shut as my mum and dad move into the house. Just the sight of them stumbling around scares me. Rosie stands up and shields my brother and me as my parents start to bicker. Terrified, I hug my brother close to me and we try to make ourselves as small as possible, hiding behind Rosie's slight frame. It won't be long now until my dad starts beating up my mum.

Evenings like this were common in my childhood. Our babysitter, Rosie, would regularly act as a boundary, trying to shield me and my brother from witnessing our father's violence.

I was six when my mother passed away. We're still not sure what it was that killed her – the drugs, the abuse, or some kind of disease? Either way, it wasn't a natural death.

From that time on, I became like a mother to my four-year-old brother, and my dad directed his anger and aggression our way. I would try to protect my little brother, but there's only so much a six-year-old can do to stop a fully grown man.

Most afternoons after school were spent at the local pub. Kids had to leave by 10pm, so Dad would hide us under the table to sleep, hoping no one would realize we were there. There was no one in my family I could turn to for help or protection. With mum gone, I was at the mercy of not just my dad but also of my cousin and uncle, both of whom abused me.

I hated my life. I felt so alone, so confused. I often wished my dad had died, not my mum.

It will come as no surprise that by the time I was 13, I was smoking weed, drinking, and even selling cigarettes to my schoolmates.

When I was 14, my dad moved four hours away with my brother but let me stay. I had nowhere to sleep and nowhere to live, but for a moment, it felt like freedom! I wasn't under my dad's roof anymore, but I was couch-surfing and only intermittently attending school. I fell pregnant at 16, and after my daughter was born, I was drinking and smoking weed every day. By the time I was 19, I was out clubbing every night and became addicted to ecstasy, speed, and cocaine, and I began selling drugs to fund my addiction.

A few years later, I was using and selling methamphetamine, and at 27 years old, I was charged with \$500,000 worth of drug trafficking, possession of illegal arms, and car theft. They said if I plead guilty, the charge would be reduced to trafficking \$50,000. But the judge refused the deal of a suspended sentence and put me on board-ordered parole, where I had to serve extra time while I applied for parole. I was on remand for 18 months.

Walking into prison didn't feel real. I was brought in very late at night, and they didn't have a cell for me. I was



STOCK PHOTO

given a cold meal and placed in the Detention Unit. It was cold and lonely, and it felt surreal.

I felt a lot of guilt and shame at that time, but I also felt alive and free! I knew I would spend my time on the inside wisely, but I never thought it would be a Godly experience. I spent some time in the 'care bears' unit, where I was under observation for self-harming.

While I was there, I had visits from a few different chaplains. Talking with Debbie was the first time in my life that anyone had really listened to my story; it was the

first time anyone had even cared enough to ask me those questions. I could see that she was genuinely interested, and I began to trust her.

When I met Wendy and Audrey, my initial reaction to them was, like a lot of the girls, "How can I manipulate these ladies to get what I want?" Wendy was never fooled! Neither was Audrey, but she would always bring me books. Audrey is one of the gentlest souls you could ever meet. She really loves Jesus! At the time, I didn't understand, and I just saw her as

a loving grandmother figure.

Towards the end of my time in prison, we discussed everything from my life goals to marriage and the scriptures. I always looked forward to Tuesdays when Audrey and Wendy would come in! Audrey really listened and empathised with me, and I knew with all my heart that she loved me.

Each chaplain I encountered shared their faith so genuinely, in their own unique ways. I don't recall Audrey carrying a Bible or telling us to study scriptures. It was more about the way she loved us. God's love poured out of her so generously that it was hard not to be impacted.

I gave my life to Christ in 2020. His love genuinely changed my life. I have been clean from all drugs since 2016. I now own my own cleaning business and have a ministry with my family where we help others to get back on track. My daughter turns 18 this year, and I'm in the process of adopting a baby. I'm part of a wonderful church family. My life is completely new – it's a miracle!

Things are not always easy, and I'm not perfect. But God is, and He is the reason I'm here today.

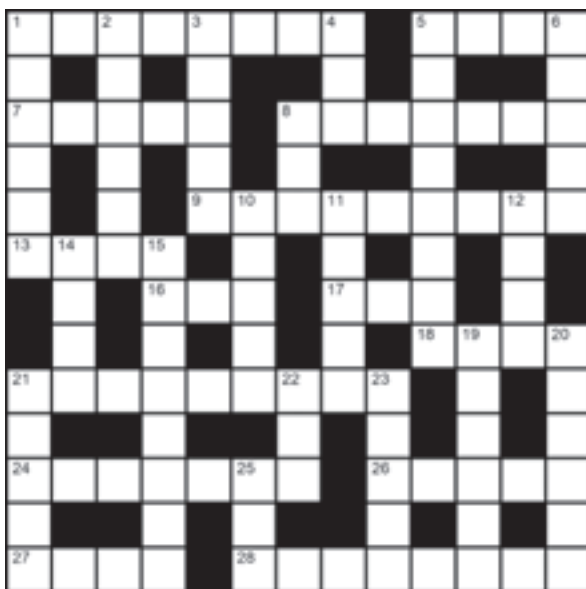
*Name has been changed

The original of this story can be found at www.prisonfellowship.org.au and it is used with kind permission.

"There is only one secure foundation: a genuine, deep relationship with Jesus Christ, which will carry you through any and all turmoil. No matter what storms are raging all around, you'll stand firm if you stand on His love."
– Charles Stanley

Coffee Break CROSSWORD & SUDOKU

- ACROSS**
- 1 Post wrapper
 - 5 Eve's fella
 - 7 Large stones
 - 8 "Downton Abbey" servant
 - 9 Exclusion from group
 - 13 It means 'half'
 - 16 Brit's grandma
 - 17 A vegetable
 - 18 Temperature, abr
 - 21 Workers
 - 24 Rich curtain fabric
 - 26 Tropical hardwood
 - 27 Trials & tribulations
 - 28 Grappling entertainer
- DOWN**
- 1 Trip to the store, say
 - 2 Sucky appliance
 - 3 Cowboy's cord
 - 4 Cause of an "I" problem
 - 5 An absolute ruler
 - 6 Preacher's residence
 - 8 Suitable; in good health
 - 10 Like dunes and beaches
 - 11 Monetary unit of India
 - 12 A hoax
 - 14 A type of cheese
 - 15 To impose something unwelcome
 - 19 To praise highly
 - 20 Words spoken to God
 - 21 An arm joint
 - 22 Farm female
 - 23 Slow-cooked meaty meals
 - 25 Garden moisture



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[SOLUTIONS PAGE 7](#)



Magic or miracles?

● From page 1

The Jewish Talmud said Jesus "worked miracles, but these miracles are attributed to sorcery and not to God."

When it came to André investigating Jesus' miracle of walking on water, he had personal experience of trying to do the same thing for a television special for the BBC and the Discovery Channel. The producers didn't want him to do it in a tank of water, but on an open lake, just like Jesus did.

The gospel writers, Matthew, Mark and John all give the account of when Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee. Here is Matthew's account:

"But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, 'It is a ghost!' and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.'

And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

André said it took him several months and thousands of dollars to develop the techniques that allowed him to fool people into thinking he was walking on water. It also required three diesel trucks to carry all the necessary

equipment for this illusion, which were not available 2,000 years ago.

At the end of his investigation, André concluded that Jesus could not have been performing magic and, "For anyone to even suggest that Jesus could have been a magician is to demonstrate an absolute, complete, total ignorance of the subject of magic."

He also said, "As a magician I deal with many illusions in my business, but in my own experience I discovered that God is no illusion; rather He is a reality, and that Jesus Christ truly is the 'magic ingredient' Who really makes life worth living!"

After his discovery, André used his talent as an illusionist "not just to entertain people but to share my deep personal faith in Christ... Over the years thousands have prayed to receive Christ through this outreach."

If Jesus' miracles were no illusion but "acts of God", it stands to reason that He is God. André said Jesus' "miracle of all miracles was His own resurrection." After living a sinless life, Jesus died on the cross for mankind's sins and then rose from the dead three days later. If you believe this and would like to make a commitment to follow Him, please see the box on page 11 entitled, **How do I Become a Christian?**

Bible verses for difficult times

- ◆ "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him." - Psalm 28:7
- ◆ "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." - Isaiah 41:10
- ◆ "The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace." - Psalm 29:11
- ◆ "But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it." - 2 Timothy 4:17
- ◆ "The Lord is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him." - Exodus 15:2
- ◆ "I love you, Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold." - Psalm 18:1-2
- ◆ "He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless." - Isaiah 40:29
- ◆ "I lift up my eyes to the mountains - where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." - Psalm 121:1-2
- ◆ "The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights." - Habakkuk 3:19
- ◆ "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong." - 1 Corinthians 16:13
- ◆ "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul." - Psalm 23:1-3
- ◆ "The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation." - Exodus 15:2
- ◆ "In the day when I cried out, you answered me, and made me bold with strength in my soul." - Psalm 138:3
- ◆ "But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble." - Psalm 59:16
- ◆ "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak." - Isaiah 40:29
- ◆ "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." - Philippians 4:13
- ◆ "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." - Exodus 14:14
- ◆ "He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength." - Isaiah 40:29
- ◆ "But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." - Isaiah 40:31
- ◆ "For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I am the one who helps you.'" - Isaiah 41:13

I found my purpose

BY LIYAT BELAY

For taking a man's life, Joel has served 16 of his 38-year sentence so far at London Correctional Institution in Ohio.

"Even though I did grow up in a very strong Christian home, I fell away from God," Joel says on a Rock City Creative YouTube video.

By age 18, he had two kids and a serious drug addiction. His crimes on the street led to committing a homicide, for which he is in jail.

For one filled with hate, Islam was very appealing, he says.

"I converted to Islam," he says. "I was a Muslim for 10 years. I was a member of the Nation of Islam."

He remained involved in gang life inside the prison and wound up in the Supermax at the Ohio State Penitentiary.

Once in solitary, he was battling his emotions. "For years I struggled with suicide. At this moment I was ready to do it," he confesses.

"I had written a suicide note. I was done with life. I was tired of feeling the pain. At that moment, I don't know why, but the name of Jesus kept coming into my head. It kept coming in my head and I tried to push it out."

Since he couldn't push the name of Jesus out of his head, he asked God for a sign.

Immediately, a corrections officer knocked on his door and asked if he wanted recreation - something that never happens, he says, when you're in solitary confinement.

"I opened my mouth to say, 'no' but 'yes' came out," he recounts.

In the recreation area, there was a TV broadcasting the pastor from Rock City Church preaching.

"There's somebody listening right now who's struggling," Pastor Chad said on the broadcast. "And God is telling you to come and rest."

Joel was hit as if by a lightning bolt.

"That was the confirmation," he says.

"Right then and there, I received Jesus, and when I received Jesus, I received a new family. It's a family of guys who love me like I haven't been loved ever.

"Even when I was in the gang life, even when I was Muslim, I have never been loved by a group of guys like these guys."

Today, Joel is one of the leaders in the prison evangelizing and discipling men. He's no longer depressed



Joel. Photo: youtube.com/@RockCityCreative

about being locked up. Instead, he asks God daily to fulfill his purpose of serving the Lord and making an impact in the lives of men.

"When it came to speaking to Christians, I couldn't stand it because I was taught through Islam to hate this,"

Joel says. "Being able to identify God's grace and to see God's mercy and to see God's love unfold in my life... it's the greatest feeling I ever felt."

This article was first published on Godreports.com and is used with kind permission

THE REASON FOR MY HOPE



"I became a Christian because I saw that life without God is dead... There is nothing I can do without God at my side." Nyameko Mzamo, Devon Correctional Centre

What's in your trash can?

BY PETER BRAIN

I'VE HEARD it said that our trash cans can tell us a lot about ourselves. So can the trash cans of our hearts, which contains the sin in our lives.

The novelist Evelyn Waugh describes that unpopular but persistently real and awful three letter word as "one little, flat, deadly word that covers a lifetime." A lifetime of trash, consistently accumulated, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year... for a lifetime, mounts up and causes us (and others) much pain, guilt and anxiety. If only there was an efficient trash removal system as regularly available as many cities' weekly collection.

The good news is that there is. Do you remember Lonnie Donegan's great old song, *My Old Man's a Dustman*? For us to benefit from God's trash collection, that wonderful removal of our sin through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we have to firstly admit that we are men and women of the dust. Once we see our sinfulness we will be more likely to engage the rubbish removalists.

When Jesus died on the cross He allowed the collective weight of God's righteous judgement to fall upon Him. Here is a very efficient and priceless trash disposal. Priceless in both senses of the word. No one else could pay the price of our offence to God save the Son of God. As the old hymn puts it, "There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin; He only could unlock the gate of Heaven and let us in." And priceless in that we need not, and could not afford to, pay for this service. Once we repent and put our trust in Jesus, God grants us a free pardon. And it is all totally undeserved. But what sheer delight, what sublime peace, what glorious freedom from guilt this brings. And we don't have to wait each week. This is a daily service, a daily joy and privilege as we come clean with God in confident and humble prayer.

The woman asked the dustman, "Am I too late?" and his answer echoes the loving call of Jesus: "No, just jump up on the cart." It's never too late to avail ourselves of this mercy but we are wise to recognise that it is never too soon either, since trash piled up can so easily contaminate and overwhelm us.

About Crossroads

The Crossroads Prison Ministries mentorship program connects you with mentors who help you study the Bible.

Mentors write to you, answer your questions, share stories from their own lives, help you see how God is speaking to you through His Word and encourage you to continue to grow in your faith.

Through the mentorship program, Crossroads offers more than one dozen different correspondence Bible study courses that each contain up to 14 lessons.

Each course is designed to help you learn more about God and how to follow Him.

If you are interested in joining the program, please fill out the attached application form and mail it to us today!

Name: _____
First Last

ID #: _____

Date of Birth: ____/____/____
MM DD YYYY

Earliest Release Date: ____/____/____
MM DD YYYY

Gender: _____

Referred by: CHAL

Prefiero el curso en español.

Complete Mailing Address:
 Institution: _____ Housing: _____
 Street or PO Box: _____
 City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____

STUDENT COMMITMENT

I will finish each lesson I receive in a timely manner and, with the help of my mentors, I will complete each course that I start. I agree that Crossroads may use anything I submit, such as my picture, testimony, writings or artwork, for promotional purposes or to further its mission.

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

When you have completed this form, please return it to:
 Crossroads Prison Ministries | PO Box 900 | Grand Rapids, MI 49509-0900
 Crossroads Prison Ministries Canada | PO Box 5037 | Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8

Gangster becomes new sort of leader

BY RODNEY J BRYLEY

Being raised in a broken home, with a single mother who couldn't read or write, soon I went to the streets for guidance, searching for a place to belong.

At 13 years old I joined a gang – and not just any gang. I joined a popular gang known for criminal enterprise violence and sin (wrongdoing against God). I almost immediately began breaking the law, selling drugs, carrying guns, robbing and stealing from people.

I became a heartless person, bitter about growing up fatherless, poor and alone. I didn't care about who I'd hurt, what I did wrong. And I only had love for the gang. They were my family, only they cared for me.

When I was 14 I had my first and only child – just a baby having a baby. I didn't know what it meant to be a father with responsibilities.

Now that I had a child I had to break the law even more just to care for him. His mother was even younger than I was – 13 – with no real mothering capabilities, for she was only a child.

While growing up in the streets, I soon learned I couldn't rely on anyone but myself. I had no morals, no principles and no values to live by. All I knew was the only person I could count on was myself, the gang and the criminals I surrounded myself with.

At the age of 19 I was sentenced to 50 years in prison. I had more time in prison than I knew what to do with. How was I going to do it all?

I spent all of my 20s and all of my 30s in prison doing 22 years in all before I made parole. By that time I was no longer a young gangster, I was known as "G". I was no longer all about following the gang – I was the leader.

Leading the gang was never a burden I wanted to bear. It not only meant I had to lead but I had to teach. This meant being responsible for encouraging violence, crime and sin. Years after I became leader I grew a conscience, which I believe came from Christ.

I had been raised in a Baptist church. At a very young age my mother had introduced me to Jesus Christ.

I got the impression early on that this Jesus was a very important man, but I had no idea just how important He would become in my life.



Rodney J Bryley

Now He began to minister to me about what my responsibilities are to the children of the world. I can assure you, it didn't involve promoting violence, drugs, crime and sin.

He told me to remember the things he taught me as a child. So I would recall my mother and how hard she would try to share Jesus with me, even as an adult. Now she would say, "Rodney, God doesn't like ugly." So I would try to do right the wrong way, but I came to understand you can't "right" a wrong. Right is right. Wrong is wrong.

I would have to make a decision to continue to live wrong or to start doing what's right. I came to

the conclusion to follow Christ. So I turned my back on the gang.

It ultimately left my life in danger. I now had to worry about someone trying to take my life for the things I knew that I learned in secrecy, things I participated in. Crimes and codes I lived by – all disavowed. No more drugs. No more crime. No more sin.

I let go of all my past life of being affiliated with a gang and living the life of sin, but I still lacked the trust to allow Jesus control over my life. I still carried weapons, knowing I was a convicted felon. So I prayed to God to help change my heart so I didn't have to carry a gun, thinking someone was trying to kill me for turning my back on the gang.

The morning after I prayed to God to change my heart was a Sunday. I had the urge to be among people I knew wouldn't judge me. So I got up and went to church.

I intended to act on my plans to live a life following Christ. Once there I prayed again for God to change my heart: "Please take the guns from me, I give You my life Lord. No matter what happens, I trust in Your will to oversee my life."

Two weeks after, I was pulled over by the police and was placed under arrest for unlawful possession of a firearm. While I sat in jail, the Holy Spirit came and ministered to me.

Christ told me that He's personally answering my prayer and if I wanted a new start then this is my chance, since He has taught me to be responsible for my actions.

Today I am a Christian – loyal to the teachings of Christ Jesus, with aspirations of being a youth minister to teach the children of tomorrow the love of Christ and stand against gangs, crime and sin.

“
The only person
I could count
on was myself.”

FROM SUICIDE WATCH TO MESSENGER OF HOPE

BY MORGAN RIVERA

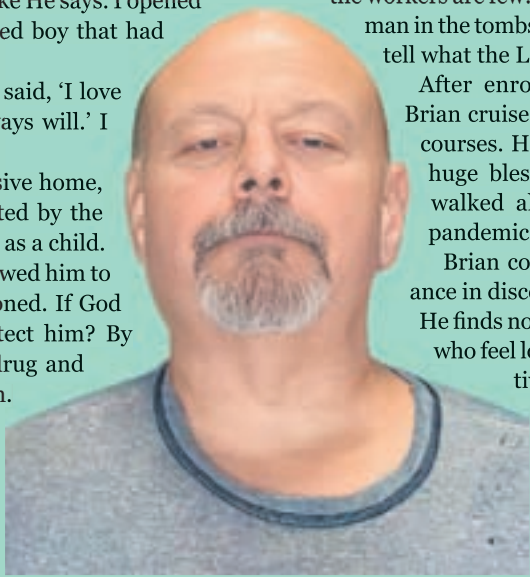
After a failed bank robbery and a high-speed chase that ended with his capture, Brian decided he would take his life to avoid going back to prison. When his suicide attempt failed, he found himself alone with God in a suicide-watch cell at the county jail.

"I was totally broken," Brian says of that day in 2015. "I asked Jesus if He loves me like He says. I opened my heart, and that little abused boy that had been locked inside came out.

"Jesus scooped him up and said, 'I love you, I always have, and I always will.' I invited Jesus into my heart."

After growing up in an abusive home, Brian's view of God was twisted by the painful things he had endured as a child. No loving God would have allowed him to be abused as he had, he reasoned. If God was love, why didn't He protect him? By age 12, Brian had turned to drug and alcohol abuse to escape his pain. His adulthood was littered with stints in jail and prison.

Once Brian encountered God and experienced salvation in his jail cell, he found his heart breaking for those suffering as he once did.



Brian now brings a message of hope.

He discovered a deep desire to share his newly found hope with others within the prison walls. He believes prison is his mission field, and he's ready to share the Gospel [the good news about Jesus dying for our sins] with anyone who will listen.

"[God] has allowed me to witness to men who have gone through the same things I have," Brian shares.

"I am free for the first time in my life – this isn't a prison but my mission field. The harvest is right, but the workers are few! Just like the demon-possessed man in the tombs, Jesus told him to 'go back and tell what the Lord has done for you.'"

After enrolling at Crossroads in 2016, Brian cruised through the first two tiers of courses. He said the ministry has been a huge blessing, and his mentor, Karen, walked alongside him throughout the pandemic.

Brian continues to ask for God's guidance in discerning whose life he can touch. He finds no shortage of people behind bars who feel lost and forgotten and are receptive to his message of hope.

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CPM instructors from churches across the world guide students in their walks with Christ through correspondence Bible studies and letters of encouragement. For more information, visit cpministries.org.



Inmates at the male section of the Johannesburg Correctional Centre also known as Sun City Prison, South Africa. (Photo by Michele Spatari / AFP) (Photo by MICHELE SPATARI/AFP via Getty Images)

Words of life in times of darkness

We all find ourselves in challenging times and places with different seasons of life, yet of all the challenging places to be found, South African prisons are some of the hardest. Prisoners are living in darkness, with overcrowding, violence and inadequate access to healthcare, with the occupancy rate of prisons at 137.7 percent*.

Although the overcrowding leads to daily physical suffering – worsened by gang-related violence – the emotional and spiritual suffering of the inmates represents another world of darkness. Yet in this darkness, the light of God's word is transforming lives.

Conrad lived in darkness his whole life. "I grew up in a small town in the Eastern Cape Province, where poverty and gangs are rife. I started missing school at a young age and joined a local gang. I was also drinking and taking drugs. Soon, I got involved in crime, breaking into people's houses and stealing. I was involved in a robbery and hijacking which led to my arrest." In prison, Conrad continued walking in darkness.

"I joined a gang and quickly rose through its ranks. We were organising stabbings of prison officials, taking them hostage and organising strikes." When Conrad was transferred to another prison, he contracted tuberculosis and had to be hospitalised.

It was there that the light began to break through the darkness. Conrad received a Bible, donated by Bible Society and distributed through World Hope Ministries, along with access to the Bible Discipleship course. This changed Conrad's life.

"I started doing the course and reading a Bible for the first time and every day. One day, as I was reading my Bible that I received, I recognised things I never saw or knew before. It was in my hospital bed that I gave my life to the Lord."

When Conrad returned to the housing section of the prison, he says, "I was a changed man. I started serving God."

Many others have also moved from darkness to light, encountering God through his life-changing and ever-relevant word.

"I was a gangster," says Jay. "I found myself empty, foolish, and with no direction. I regret my old life, even the group I used to hang around with."

The Bible Discipleship lessons were crucial for Jay. "These lessons gave me direction; reshaped my life. I discovered my life from the Word of God ... Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The Bible became real in my life and gave me hope in a hopeless situation."

Jay is so thankful for his Bible, and for those who donated it. He says, "You touched my life with the Word of God."

Behki's life turned into a nightmare when he and his best friend were playing with guns.

"I murdered my best friend," he recalls. "I didn't kill him intentionally; it was a mistake. I was living my life the way I liked, telling lies."

Things changed for Behki in prison, when he took the Bible Discipleship lessons. "I started to dwell in the Word of Christ and started to share Christ with other people. The Bible means a lot to me because when I want to connect with God, I always read the Bible, and it helps when I research other Scriptures."

"My life was so empty, I never been happy," says Zenzo.

"There was something that was not there, but I did not know at that time what was short. I became selfish. I did not believe in anything, but only in myself."

Zenzo's life was changed by the Bible Discipleship course.

"After I became a child of God, I became happy because of the good news about Christ. Before, I didn't know my purpose in this world but now I know. I know the truth now and I am trying by all means to live by the word of God because it won't make me stumble. Without the word of God, I will be lost. It always reminds me what to do and it comforts and encourages me."

Edson's story is similar to Zenzo's.

"My life before I've received Christ was a mess. I used to live like the world; doing all sorts of bad things."

His life changed because of his encounter with God's word.

"When I started studying the Bible Discipleship lessons, I became a light of the world and a light for everyone around me. I know that God so loved the world and now I have received eternal life. I may suffer, but I suffer for doing what is right... I also have confidence and hope that God will not leave me nor forsake me." Bible Society Australia is working with World Hope Ministries as they advocate for the Bible in the dark places of South Africa's prisons, and especially in the darkness of prisoners' hearts.

"I started to forget the reason I was in prison because of the teachings and knowledge I received from the program; it gave me peace," testifies Mvuzo Jack, who felt God's presence as he attended the program.

"The lessons have revived the Spirit of God in me."

*According to the Department of Correctional Services' 2020/21 Annual Report. From Sower magazine Autumn 2023 – Bible Society Australia

Hope in solitary confinement

BY PAIGE DEUR

Charles (right) grew up in an abusive and dysfunctional home, witnessing his father mistreat his mother.

After enduring years of abuse, his mom crossed state lines to a domestic violence shelter with Charles and his three siblings in tow. Yet life was far from stable, and they often found themselves without a permanent home.

Several years later, Charles moved back in with his dad, stepmom, and half-sister. Things seemed better for a while, but his semblance of stability crumbled as quickly as his dad's second marriage.

"After that, we always seemed to struggle, and I think my dad blamed me for ruining that part of his life. He was always hard on me after that," Charles recalls. "The words he abused me with hurt far more than any of the physical abuse I endured."

Over the years, Charles heard tales of his father's criminal past and stints in prison. In an attempt to win his father's approval, he began adopting a tough exterior. "I think on some level I tried to relate to my father and be a man of whom he would be proud," he shares.

At 12, weary of the abuse he had received, Charles began running away and had his first encounters with the law.

Charles embraced Christianity at 14, initially learning about it through at-risk youth programs and his great-grandmother. He yearned for the kind of love he had heard about, a love "beyond comprehension." However, he quickly fell away from his faith.

"I spent almost all of my teenage years locked up or on the run. I started my first prison term when I was 18," he says. "It's crazy how lost and blind I was in that season of my life. I was a part of this world and living in so much darkness. And that darkness was staining my soul."

Caught in the depths of that darkness, Charles made the grave choice that resulted in his current life sentence. For much of the past 19 years, he has been held in solitary confinement.

"I've never looked back with regret."

Yet that grim, isolated place is where Charles's life transformed. "I believe God got me back there in that hole so He could get my attention. He wanted me somewhere quiet so I could hear His voice," he says. In April 2020, with no escape from his isolation, Charles began reflecting on his life, the pain he had caused, and the losses he had experienced. He felt convicted and lost, but amidst the turmoil, he remembered his earlier decision to follow Christ.

"Throughout my life, He was always there, trying to get my attention, but I just didn't have the courage to truly live my life for Him... [I was] always ashamed of this God who loves, always afraid of appearing weak for needing Him, for wanting Him in my life," Charles admits.

As he sat in his cell, Charles realized he had it backward: going to church and living for Christ was an act of strength, not weakness.

"I was worried about my reputation, about what other people thought about me," he says. "God showed me that I was actually being a coward... And that to live my life for Him was true courage... This revelation rocked me to the core, and I spent a couple of months ruminating and soul-searching."

Three months later, Charles fell to his knees in repentance and rededicated his life to Jesus. From then on, he immersed himself in reading the Bible, discovering healing, encouragement, and strength within its pages.

Charles shared that the hope he found in Christ replaced the thoughts of suicide that had plagued him for so long, leaving him with "indescribable gratitude."

His newfound faith brought about unexpected changes. Charles chose to step away from his former gang affiliations, reaching out to his former comrades with the news of his transformation. To his surprise, instead of violence, he received love and understanding.

"I knew God was calling me... but it was my whole heart or nothing! I went all in, regardless of what it might cost me and its consequences. I didn't want to walk any longer in any darkness [or] exist in anything but the truth. Everything that I had considered important and worthwhile in my past I now counted nothing compared to knowing my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! I expected a short life because of my decision. I honestly expected death, but I was content, knowing that I'd be with Jesus if that came to pass... INSTEAD, God has given me abundant life!"

As a new believer, Charles shared that there aren't many opportunities for Christian fellowship at his facility, and there hasn't been a church service in their yard for more than two years. Seeking the encouragement of other believers, he enrolled in the Crossroads program in the fall of 2020 and was assigned a Tier 2 mentor, who will walk alongside him in his faith journey one-on-one.

"I've never looked back with regret; only wish I would have made this choice sooner," Charles attests. "But it took all that and this to bring me to this point in life. If this was the only way to get me to a place of complete surrender, then even if I could, I wouldn't change a thing in my life, except the life I took." •

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I found riches better than money

Twelve kidnappings, 12 armed robberies, 17 aggravated assaults: Lázaro faced up to 104 years in prison.

Lázaro Lopez had a relatively normal childhood. He was being raised in a good home.

"My dad was a hard-working man. I really have no excuse," says Lázaro, referring to what prompted him to rebel against his family and begin his criminal behavior. He and his brother, drawn to the promise of quick money, began robbing computer stores, stealing the computers' memories, and sending them back to Venezuela.

The love of money, paired with drug addiction, eventually led to what seemed like a dead-end. After his brother was caught, Lázaro turned himself in. He faced charges for 12 kidnappings, 12 armed robberies, and 17 aggravated assaults. The possibility of being sentenced to 104 years in prison made giving up seem like the best option.

"In jail I paid two boxes of cigarettes so that a special blade could be made for me," Lázaro recalls. "I thought I'd never get out again. No hope, no future, no vision. I basically just gave up on life."

But a persistent cellmate in the Miami-Dade county jail kept sharing the Gospel with Lázaro. One day when he couldn't get to his own magazines, Lázaro picked up the Bible his cellmate had left him. "I was tired of being sick and tired," he says. When he opened up to Matthew 11:28, he read, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Lázaro threw away the shank he had made and went to the chapel, where he accepted Christ.

As they awaited trial, Lázaro and his brother began to study God's Word and lead Bible studies. The two built up such a great reputation with the officers that they were allowed to share a cell for six months. What was once known as the "House of Pain," says Lázaro, became the "House



Lázaro Lopez

of Prayer." After four years in the county jail, the pair went to trial, where at first, the outcome didn't look good. Lázaro remembers the moment his mother just looked at them and said, "I can't believe you did all these things."

But they prayed, and on the third day, the judge held the jurors from entering the courtroom. "Out of the compassion of my heart," he announced, "I'm going to give them 12 years," which was about 10 times shorter than Lázaro thought he might get.

Not only did he receive a much shorter sentence, by the grace of God, but after he entered Glades Correctional Institution in Florida, he experienced God's rich blessings and compassion through Prison Fellowship Angel Tree, a program of Prison Fellowship that serves incarcerated parents by providing a pathway for restoring and strengthening their relationships with their children and families, provided his daughter with a Christmas gift.

"When they delivered that gift, it wasn't just a gift given," he

recalls. "They ministered to my daughter."

And because Lázaro himself was mentored by Prison Fellowship volunteers through classes and marriage counseling, he grew from being a "part-time dad" who wasn't very involved in his daughter's life to a father who helped lay a strong foundation for her faith in the Lord.

Today, he and his now adult daughter minister together in Florida, and every Christmas, Lázaro helps hand out Angel Tree gifts at his church. "God has been awesome through Prison Fellowship and Angel Tree in my life," he says.

Even though Lázaro served his time behind bars, he has found himself back in prison – this time, as a mentor and Prison Fellowship volunteer. He's also an administrator at the Anchor House, a Christ-centered transitional house to help former inmates with job placement, communication and social skills, and budgeting. "I didn't have that help when I got out, and it was kind of difficult,"

Lázaro says. He emphasizes the need for former prisoners to have accountability through community and to serve. "Isolation is where you falter and go back six feet under," he says.

And Lázaro sees his own service as a second chance at life he's been offered through God's grace. He shares the excitement he

felt recently when helping a young man, who had been in and out of prison, find a job. "I'd rather be nowhere else but here, right now," he says. "We have to serve. For those of us who have an addictive behavior, it's everything." •

The original of this story can be found at www.prisonfellowship.org and is used with kind permission.

"I basically just gave up on life."

PRISON IS WHAT I NEEDED

BY ANNE HAMMING

Craig had a solid start on a rewarding life. He had earned degrees in film production, and he was flourishing in his young career. He was also the proud father of two young children.

Then, his life took a disastrous turn that led to a 10-year prison sentence. Now, he is working hard to turn his life around in the years that remain in his sentence.

"When you are growing up, you don't say, 'I want to go to prison,'" Craig said. "I asked God, 'Where did I go wrong? Show me how I can get back on Your road.'"

He started going to chapel and invited others to attend with him. At the chapel, he found a Crossroads Prison Ministries enrolment card, and he has been studying with Crossroads for a year. The lessons and letters have helped him grapple with the choices that led him to prison. The lessons are also drawing him closer to God.

When Craig was growing up, a neighborhood church was there for him, providing a buffer of hope against the harsh realities and abuse at home. His parents had substance abuse problems, which led them to divorce when he was six years old. He remembers taking care of his mother while he was still a child, praying she wouldn't die from her addiction or her abusive boyfriend.

The neighborhood church was a continued presence through his adolescence, and he even considered pursuing a seminary degree until a division in the church turned him off. In place of seminary,

film production captured his attention. From there, life zoomed along for several years as he built a career and started a family. And then his life veered completely off course. As difficult as it has been to go to prison, Craig said prison is exactly what he needed to get his life on a better path because he has the chance to study and pray. Craig has recommitted his life to Christ, accepting the grace of God's forgiveness as he works toward the day of his release. From behind bars, he encourages his parents in their newfound faith and their sobriety. He also sees his children monthly. Even from behind bars, he tries to be a stable, faithful presence in their lives as he strives to be the parent he never had.

Crossroads has become an important part of Craig's life. The feedback on the lessons supports his learning, and the letters and prayers from his mentors help him to carry on.

"It's a corny saying, but you can make a mess into a message," he said. "We have two jobs in life: to know Him and to make Him known."

Craig is doing both jobs as he studies and shares the love of Christ with his family outside prison walls and with the people around him in prison. He has been involved in growing participation in a daily prayer circle in his dorm and helped to organize a worship time in the prison yard on Sunday afternoons. "I know I am walking out a different man," Craig said. •

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WORDS FOR THE HEART

STUDIES IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Welcome to this Bible Study. Read slowly what I have written. If you have a Bible, look up the reference verses given, and allow the Holy Spirit to minister to your soul through them. – ALAN BAILEY

Mark 3:13-4:9

INTRODUCTION

THE early chapters of Mark show us how the reputation of Jesus quickly spread. People came from all directions to see Him and to experience healing.

The days were full, and the Lord and His disciples had little time to themselves as the needs of people were pressing on them. Now we are faced with new developments which we will look at.

Verses 13-15 "Jesus went up into the hills and called to Him those He wanted, and they came to Him. He appointed 12 – designating them apostles – that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons."

Up to this point, there had been a number of people closely following Jesus but were not committed to Him. Now Jesus was pointing out 12 who were to have part in His ministry and in fact, to be carriers of the Gospel for the rest of their lives. By being with Him they would learn and experience what it was to be messengers,

preaching God's Good News. They were but ordinary people with much to learn.

Verses 16-19 "These are the 12 He appointed: Simon (to whom He gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them He gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder); Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him."

Reading the four Gospels we hear much about these men. They were not immediately useful, efficient workers and they made many mistakes. But they went on loyally, endeavouring to please their Lord. The one exception is Judas, now well-known as the betrayer of Jesus.

Verses 20, 21 "Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that He and His disciples were not even able to eat. When His family heard about this, they went out to take charge of Him, for they said, 'He is out of His mind.'"

We can imagine a house full of noisy people, all talking and jostling and excited. It was a situation hard to control as people simply crowded around.

Jesus had parents and brothers and sisters who heard what was



IMAGE: BIBLEPICS.CO

circle around Him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.'"

In their concern about Jesus, it seems that His family wanted to take Him home to prevent any embarrassment. Of course, their concern was misplaced. Perhaps the response Jesus gave is a bit surprising. But He wasn't disowning His own people, but He was showing that He has a bigger family – all those who do the Father's will.

Chapter 4 verse 1 "On another occasion Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around Him was so large that He got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge."

We can visualize this scene. To prevent the crowd pressing on Jesus, sitting in a boat just out from the edge of the lake was a good move to make.

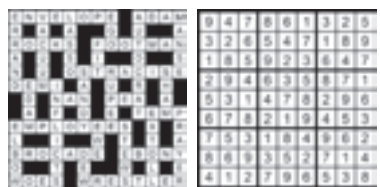
Verses 2-8 "He taught them many things by parables, and in His teaching said: 'Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew, and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.'

"Then Jesus said, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'"

This well-known parable shows the different responses to the Word of God as it is proclaimed. In the first three cases the result is failure, the last case speaks of a real and true response to the Gospel message.

CONCLUSION

We will say more about this parable in our next study. It reflects so much in our experience which is so typical, so common. In the meantime, we need to ask ourselves what response we are giving to what we are hearing. Mark is giving more and more evidence showing who Jesus is. Is He Master and Lord of our lives? That is the central question.



happening and felt alarmed about such behaviour. Was Jesus unwell? Was this carrying on, madness? They simply did not understand, though later in His ministry they understood great deal more.

Verse 22 "And the teachers of the law that came down from Jerusalem said, 'He is possessed by Beelzebub. By the prince of demons, He is driving out demons.'"

These Jews from Jerusalem must have heard how people were flocking to hear Jesus, so they came to the Galilee area to see for themselves. Their accusation was as low and insulting as could possibly be. Here was the Son of God doing good as no-one else could and they brand Him as being in league with the devil! Prejudice can make people think and say almost anything, even outlandish things.

Verses 23-27 "So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables: 'How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no-one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.'"

The Lord pointed out what should have been obvious to these people. Evil spirits were being cast out, so it certainly wasn't Satan who was doing it. It is simply unreasonable to say that any cause will act against itself. So, these accusers were suggesting something that simply makes no sense. They should have been honest and recognised that Jesus was doing good in opposition to Satan and his works.

Verses 28-30 "I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin.' He said this because they were saying, 'He has an evil spirit.'"

All manner of sins can be forgiven by God. (Remembering that we need to repent and confess our sins.) But to attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan is to put the speaker beyond mercy. They are condemned. So, this event has produced a very solemn warning.

Verses 31-35 "Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call Him. A crowd was sitting around Him, and they told Him, 'Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.' 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' He asked. Then He looked at those seated in a

HOW DO I BECOME A CHRISTIAN?

Anyone can gain the eternal life offered through Jesus Christ

We read in God's word: "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16)

OUR PROBLEM:	Separation from God "Everyone has sinned. Nobody is good enough because God's standards are perfect" (Romans 3:23)	ADMIT
GOD'S REMEDY / SOLUTION:	Jesus died on the cross "God demonstrates His own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8)	BELIEVE
OUR RESPONSE:	Trust Jesus by receiving Him "To all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12)	COMMIT

Here is an example of how you can pray.

Dear Father in Heaven. I come to you now because I want to be saved. Please, forgive me of my sins. I believe that you sent your Son Jesus Christ to die for me and that you have raised him from the dead. I now ask Jesus Christ to come into my life as my Saviour and Lord. Take control of my life. Please make me the person You created me to be. In Jesus Christ's name. Amen

The Lord Jesus says: "I tell you the truth. Everyone who believes in me has eternal life." (John 6:47).
He gives life of a wonderful quality that continues forever.

What now?

1. Tell someone - either a fellow prisoner who is a Christian, or your Prison Chaplain.
2. Ask a friend or family member to bring you a Bible. Ask the Prison Chaplain to sign you up to a correspondence discipleship program.
3. Keep praying. Talk to God anywhere, about anything. He is always listening, and you don't need a formula.
4. Find out if your prison has church services and attend them regularly.

AS A NEXT STEP:

I have prayed the prayer [ABOVE]

Please send me: Bible
 Some 'starting off' literature
 Information on a helpful church

* Please check and write clearly *

Name _____ Age _____

Address _____

Send to: Challenge Literature Fellowship, 2634 Drake Road, Lebanon Ohio, 45036

All overseas enquiries are referred onto someone in their own country

IN THE DARK ABOUT DEATH?

BY PETER BRAIN

THERE are many humorous graveyard inscriptions. Recently I came across one that said, "Here lies my wife: here let her lie! Now she's at rest, and so am I." Another said, "I told you I was sick."

Humour is one way of handling death, which we all know is anything but funny. There are other ways of coping with death, and all the uncertainty and fear it engenders.

Some say there is nothing after death; what we see is all there is. Others rely on reincarnation as an explanation for death.

Still others trivialise the awfulness of death by saying that death is just a natural part of life. And others, that everyone will go to Heaven or that God will give us a second chance after we die.

It's all fairly confusing, and sad, don't you think? Especially since God would neither have us fearful nor living in the dark about death and eternity.

There are some who would say that the Christian faith is escapism – but what if, as Dr I. Howard Marshall writes, "it is the only ultimate realism"?

Now, to make a claim like that there must be some clear public domain evidence. Wonderfully, there is. Marshall reminds us that "it rests foursquare on the fact

that Jesus has defeated death, and anybody who can defeat death can defeat anything."

The coming of Jesus into our world gives us a new way of looking at things.

He offers life eternal to all who trust Him now and will honour the choice of all who refuse Him with death eternal. There is no reincarnation or second chance. The choice of eternity hangs on the decision we make about Jesus now.

One man said that "at death I shall change my place, but not my company", and another that "death has been described as the old family servant who opens the door to welcome the children home."

For those trusting in Jesus, death holds no more fear than going to sleep at night. And it is all because of Jesus.

We see this confidence in John Newton, who gave us the hymn *Amazing Grace*, when he said to one of his visitors toward the end of his life, "I am like a person going on a journey in a stage coach, who expects its arrival every hour and is frequently looking out of the window for it." And the reason for his confidence was revealed by his friend who heard his final words, "My memory is nearly gone but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior".



Houston Texans quarterback CJ Stroud (7) during a game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and Houston Texans on October 1, 2023. (Photo by Leslie Plaza Johnson/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)

RISING STAR

STAYS GROUNDED

BY CASEY REDMOND

His parents divorced. Then his dad, a former pastor, got locked up for 38 years. Thrown on economic hard times, his family lived in a small apartment atop a storage facility and ate insect-infested cereal to get by.

Californian CJ Stroud aimed for the NFL to provide for his mom and three siblings. Now he's predicted to be named the Houston Texans' first league MVP for the 2024 season.

It hasn't been an easy road. Born October 3, 2001 in Rancho Cucamonga, California, Coleridge "CJ" Bernard Stroud IV was the youngest in the family. He learned football from his father, who was a pastor for 20 years after turning his back on a life of crime.

By age nine, CJ could throw a 50-yard pass, according to reports. His dad was always at his games. But one day, Coleridge Bernard Stroud III didn't show up.

After divorcing CJ's mother in 2015, his dad broke into a woman's car, robbing and assaulting her. When the police tailed him, he crashed into a pole and jumped into the San Diego Bay from a bridge to escape police, according to reports.

Because he was a repeat offender, CJ's dad was sentenced to 38 years. "My pops, he was my best friend. To have your best friend snatched like that, it was tough. I just look at the things my dad did that were positive, but for a while, it wasn't like that. I hated my pops for real. Like man, how could you just leave me like that?" His coach at the time,

Willy Munford, asked CJ where his dad was.

"CJ told me he didn't want to talk about it. I was going to leave that one alone," Willy said on a YouTube video. "He played well that year. But he was different. You could tell. He wasn't playing as well as he was supposed to. He still had the arm. But he went quiet."

After his dad's incarceration, lack of money figured prominently in his daily life. CJ, his three siblings and their mother moved into a small apartment atop a storage facility Rancho Cucamonga, which she managed.

CJ ate cereal with bugs in it and didn't have money for cleats. He used hand-me-downs.

There was, of course, no way he could hire a personal coach to raise his ability to NFL level, as many aspiring quarterbacks do. So instead, he watched Drew Brees videos on YouTube. The NFL Hall-of-Famer who played for the New Orleans Saints explained proper throwing form and tactics.

When he was running low on contact lenses because of a lack of money, CJ played with one contact lens, using just one eye.

"My life has been like a roller coaster. It's been up and down. I've been through hell and back. I've been through so much in my life. I was young. I was a kid when this stuff happened. I had to grow up

early. I had to grow up so fast," CJ said on an NFL interview.

"I'm doing this for my mom and my brothers and my sisters – my family at home. Just those things."

In his last two years of high school, CJ threw well enough to capture the attention of the University of Georgia, University of Michigan, University of Colorado and Ohio State University.

Representatives of those colleges came to visit his family – at the storage facility.

CJ committed to Ohio State and redshirted under Justin Fields (current quarterback for the Chicago Bears). In his first season as a starter, CJ threw for over 4400 yards, with 44 touchdowns and 71 percent completion rate and only six interceptions. CJ placed fourth in the Heisman race in just his first

season. When CJ got to college he made an important discovery.

"I found Christ for myself," he tells Faith on the Field host Rob Maaddi. "It's definitely something that I'm still learning to this day. I'm definitely not perfect... It does keep me grounded; it does keep me humble just because I know anything can be stripped away at any point."

Now describing himself as a "follower of Christ" on social media, CJ tells Fox News, "I don't deserve [God's] grace and His mercy but He still gives it to me and I love Him for that. It's not about me, it's about Him and His glory..."

"Football has a lot of ups and downs, it has a lot of twists and turns, but at the end of the day, it's all about your foundation. And something that's set my foundation is my faith."

After his second season with Ohio State, CJ decided to go straight to the NFL draft.

In his first 15 games of his first season with the Houston Texans (this season), CJ threw for 4100

yards (rookie record is 4300), with a 66 percent completion rate, 23 touchdowns and five interceptions. He became the youngest quarterback to win a playoff game against the Cleveland Browns. CJ tied a record with Baker Mayfield for best touchdown/interception rate in the playoffs with an astounding 3/0.

With the money he got for playing in the NFL, CJ was able to buy a new home for his family, ensuring they would never be financially needy again.

He's an advocate for prison reform, believing his father was harshly sentenced and should receive mercy because he acted out of grief from the divorce. His cleat says, "Free Pops."

"When I talk to him now, I don't hold any ill will. I told him I love him. He's made his mistakes. I've made mine. It's not about the bad. It's the nature of the beast. You accept the good with the bad. I thank God for a second chance at this game."

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CJ Stroud #7 of the Houston Texans before kickoff against the New Orleans Saints at NRG Stadium on October 15, 2023 in Houston, Texas. (Photo by Cooper Neill/Getty Images)

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